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ABSTRACT

Girls-only programs in Canadian public schools are a recent phenomenon; and, similar to the U.S. context, they have been designed primarily to provide equitable education for girls (boys programs are even newer and more scarce). A study investigated three such programs in Western Canada, each having similar and unique features. Research was qualitative and goals were to explore the students' perceptions of gendered issues in schools and to examine the pedagogical and curricular practices of teachers in single-gender classrooms to see how these teachers view their classroom practices in relation to the philosophy and goals of the programs. Research methods included participant observation; interviews with students, parents, teachers, and administrators; and collection of school documents that record the histories, policy, stories of success, and problems. Preliminary findings suggest that underlying the inception of each program is a belief in the need to address issues of gender for adolescents. Some of the original purposes of these single-gender classes that have been suggested by teachers and administrators in all three programs include providing opportunities for adolescents to focus more on their academic learning rather than on social concerns; providing "safe and comfortable" environments for students to discuss issues of importance to them as gendered people; and providing a place where girls may gain skills and confidence in the areas of mathematics, science, and technology. Objectives for boys were less clear, but include a greater focus on schoolwork and a focus on increased literacy skills and interests. These programs are changing the nature of their schools. Contains 30 references. (BT)

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Single-Sex Classrooms: A Place for Transformation of Policy and Practice

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Single-Sex Classrooms: A Place for Transformation of Policy and Practice

Introduction

This presentation is part of a larger research project in which we are beginning to examine issues of gender, the construction of gendered identities, and the spaces in schools and in curriculum for gender. We are looking at schools as one context in the lives of adolescents where they are "doing gender" (Thorne, 1993), and we are looking at schools involved in re-articulating what school and curriculum could be for girls and boys. As we sit in this room today, all of us participants in the American Educational Research Association conference, we can reflect on our own personal journeys and the struggles and contributions of the feminist movement and of men's movements; yet, in spite of the advances over the years, issues of gender continue to surface in public education.

In Canadian schools there is a growing concern about issues of gender, the inequities between boys and girls (Canadian Teachers' Federation; 1990a; Rice & Russell, 1995), the gendered nature of school harassment (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1990b; Kaufman, 1993, 1997; Larkin, 1994, 1997; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, 1994; Larkin, 1994), the need for discussions of gender in curriculum and pedagogy (Ellis, 1993; Robertson, 1992; Rogers, 1985, 1997) and the gendered nature of literacy (Blair, 1998; Blair & Sanford, 1999: Cherland, 1994; Ricker-Wilson, 1999; Wason-Ellam, 1997).

It is generally recognized that North American schools have not reached full potential for all students and, in particular, for girls (American Association of University Women, 1992; Canadian Teachers Federation, 1990a; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Most provinces and school districts in Canada have adopted policy initiatives in the area of gender equity; however, a great deal needs to be done in order for these policies to be fully operationalized and for school districts and local schools to provide full equality of opportunity for girls.

There is a growing public awareness about gender equity and at the same time a growing dissatisfaction as to what it means. Gender equity is not just about hiring and promotion of women; it is about curriculum and pedagogy, it's about relations between boys and girls, it's about expectations, it's about classroom climate, it's about sexual harassment, and it's about equality of learning opportunity.

In our work in single-gender programs we are finding that separation by gender, or biological sex, has raised many issues. In this paper we use the term *gender* rather than *sex*, recognizing the limitations and essentialness of the categories of male and female, a classification of groups based primarily on biological sex. Among teachers and administrators we are seeing a growing awareness of curriculum needs, pedagogical concerns, and concerns over relations of power. There is also a growing recognition of the gendered nature of schools, the social construction of this construct "gender," and the implications for a deeper understanding of gender for equity of outcomes. In single-gender schools and programs, gender is, by virtue of its prominence, changing the nature of these schools.

Single-gender classrooms and programs in public schools are new to the Western Canadian context in the past five years. Coeducational schooling based on the premise that the same means equal for both genders has been the norm in public education in Canada as in the U.S. for most of this century (Riordan, 1990, Tyack & Hansot, 1990). Until recently, most single-gender programs have fallen within the jurisdiction of private schools.

Girls-only private schools such as Balmoral Hall in Winnipeg, Linden School in Toronto, and The Study in Montreal have histories of providing exceptional educational opportunities where girls are empowered to be both learners and leaders. Each of these schools set out to provide for their girls an excellence of academic preparation as well as curriculum that includes the contributions of women. These schools have provided for the daughters of the Canadian elite what most parents would want for their daughters. As a testimony to their academic success, the graduates of these schools have produced an inordinate percentage of women in leadership in both the public and private sectors in Canada.

In the consideration of what does and doesn't contribute to success for girls in school, Staton & Larkin (1993) framed gender equity in Canadian schools in terms of access, inclusion, climate, and empowerment. The AICE Model of Equal Opportunity is a comprehensive and inclusive look at equity initiatives in schools.

> ACCESS: Encouraging equal opportunity in instruction, particularly in fields related to nontraditional jobs. Enabling young people to choose from a range of careers.
>
> INCLUSION: Looking at gender bias in teaching and learning materials both in terms of inclusive language and content.
>
> CLIMATE: Creating an educational atmosphere that is safe and supports equity. Dealing with sexual harassment and violence against women. Looking at what goes on the walls [and] what goes on in the halls.
>
> EMPOWERMENT: Creating a space within the school where young women can develop a sense of solidarity. Providing an antidote to counter the negative messages young women receive both within and beyond their schools.

Staton & Larkin (1993) suggested that, to be effective, programs of equal opportunity must give equal weight to all four components. "It's a lot like baking a cake; you can't leave out the eggs or the flour. Similarly, if an equal opportunity program doesn't include all the essential ingredients, it won't be very effective" (p. 152). Larkin and Staton also suggested that through a comprehensive approach such as the AICE Model of Equal Opportunity, educators will be tackling specific problems such as sexual harassment in a wider context of gender inequity.

In this paper we will argue that examining single-gender programs from this framework may give us a way to look at policy and practice and a way to understand the role they can play in the transformation of current policy and practice.

Single-gender programs in public schools have emerged as one way to redress the gendered inequities in schools. These fledgling initiatives come in a variety of configurations and contexts. Those taking leadership in developing these programs have few models to follow and

find themselves facing many new and many challenging questions. In this research we began by looking at programs for girls and have in the past year also begun to include boys-only classes.

In Western Canada we are finding that single-gender programs are beginning to emerge at the junior high and middle schools levels. There is some consensus that this is a time where schools are failing girls. Adolescence is a critical time for the construction of gendered identity, and often academic success can be jeopardized. It is at this point where many girls begin to lose confidence in themselves as learners (Barbieri, 1995; Gilligan, 1982, 1993a, 1993b) and begin to question their own knowledge and authority. As we look at the research on early adolescent girls, it is obvious that there are many questions that need to be explored in the field of gender equity for early adolescents.

Girls-only programs in Canadian public schools are a recent phenomenon; and, similar to the American context, they have been designed primarily to provide equitable education for girls (American Association of University Women, 1998). Boys programs are even newer and more scarce. In this research we are examining the practices and policies of three of these programs in Western Canada to better understand what single-gender programs have to contribute to gender equity for early adolescents. Single-gender programs provide an important contrast to the more commonly experienced co-educational programs and are one context where gender becomes explicit. It is our contention that these programs are potential sites for a transformation of educational practice that can benefit both boys and girls.

Research Methodology

We have investigated three such programs in Western Canada, each having similar and unique features. Our research is qualitative in nature and our goals are

1. to explore the students' perceptions of gendered issues in schools. To do this we are interviewing the student participants about their present and past educational experiences to determine any differences that might exist in philosophy and/or teaching strategies because of the single-gender element of their programs; and

2. to examine the pedagogical and curricular practices of teachers in single-gender classrooms to examine how these teachers view their classroom practices in relation to the philosophies and goals of the programs, as well as how they view the gendered nature of school for these young adults.

Our research methods include participant observations of school and classroom events; interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and parents; and collections of school documents that record the histories, policy, stories of success, and problems.

Context of the Study

East Glen School

East Glen School is a small central-city K-8 school in a Western Canadian city. It has a student population of 250, with 60 children in single-gender classes in the 7th and 8th grades. East Glen is situated in an older, multicultural, lower middle class neighborhood that is recently experiencing some rejuvenation as young and more affluent middle class professional families are buying property and renovating homes adjacent to a bustling trendy business street in the neighborhood.

The all-girls program at East Glen was initiated in the fall of 1995 in an effort to attract students to a shrinking school population. The program was conceptualized by a collective of staff and principal who recognized the needs of girls in upper elementary and believed that they could improve the educational experiences for their middle years girls. For the first two years the program was designed and operated as an all-girls program with a small co-ed class in the school for Grades 7 and 8 students. The program was designed to tailor the curriculum to the girls and address gender issues. Language arts curriculum adaptations included female author studies, writers' workshops led by local women authors, and units of study on women in areas such as media and advertising. In the science and math courses the teacher developed a rocket study project, including a public launch event. The teachers have incorporated a technology and computer component to the program that is co-sponsored by a Canadian corporation. This

sponsorship included a new computer lab and Internet on-line system, training for staff, and extended opportunities for the students. In the third year, 1997-1998, the co-ed Grades 7 and 8 classes in the school became a single-gender split Grade 7/8 boys-only class. This class had not been planned for in advance, and over these last two years the staff have begun to address issues for early adolescent boys.

Nancy Major All Girls Junior High School

Nancy Major All Girls Junior High School is located in a working class neighborhood very close to the downtown district. It is a multicultural neighborhood, but the students are not primarily neighborhood youth. They come to the program from all over the city. Nancy Major Girls Junior High is an alternative program of choice initiated in the fall of 1995 by local parents who wanted an option for academic achievement and leadership possibilities for their early adolescent girls. The parents' council of the school has been very active in the support and development of this program . There were 80 girls in the first year, 160 in the second, and 225 in the past two years in Grades 7 to 9. There are presently three classes at each grade level. This past year the program expanded to a second location and another 100 girls. The new program is situated in a more middle class neighborhood in another district of the city, but also draws students from across the city. Parents and girls apply to get in to both locations, and presently there is a waiting list for entry.

Nancy Major offers a range of core classes and options for the girls, including an extended Grade 9 science experience at the Bamford Marine Station on the west coast of Vancouver Island, in British Columbia, Canada. This intensive marine biology fieldwork opportunity is viewed as one of the highlights of the program. Nancy Major's program's focus on science has won the school awards in recent years such as the selection of two students to go to the Canada-wide science fair this spring. It is rare that two students from one local school are selected, and they are the only two selected from the entire city. Other program innovations include communication and writers' events as well as a focus on opportunities for the girls to

bridge classroom learning to the outside community and world. They visit and work with local professionals and charity organizations, and undertake real-world problem-solving ventures.

Wood Harbour Junior High School

Wood Harbour Junior High is situated in a suburban satellite community adjacent to a large Canadian city and has a student body of 550 students, with seven classes of each grade level. This single-gender program began on the initiation of the school guidance counsellor and principal in the fall of 1997. They discussed the possibilities with the school parents council and teachers, and a decision was made that a single-gender program might benefit both boys and girls. The students are designated to the single-gender classes based on the parents' and students' choice, similar to the way that children are placed in the French immersion strand at this school. During its first year there were five single-gender classrooms in the school, one girls' class for each of Grades 7 to 9, and one boys' class in Grades 7 and 8. This year they have reduced the program to girls only at the 7th and 8th grades.

In this program the students take their core classes—math-science, English language arts, and social studies—as single gender and then are in co-educational classes for their optional courses. During the first year of this program the teachers made a deliberate choice not to do anything different in terms of curriculum and methodology. During the first year most of the teachers felt that the program was more successful for the girls than it was for the boys, and at the end of the year a decision was made to have only the girls for the second year. During the second year, although no major curriculum changes or special events were planned for the girls' program, teachers started to talk about the selection of the material and the way they related to the girls in the classes. For the upcoming year, 1999-2000, the school has decided to reinstate the boys' program at the 7th grade and to look at ways in which the boys' program would be more tailored to the need of boys. For example, they are hoping to increase the time for the physical education and outdoor education component of their program. The English language arts teacher is also redesigning her language arts curriculum in order to address issues of literacy for boys.

For example, she is looking at both topics and genre in her selection of literature, the range of their media literacy, and methodological considerations to build the reader-writer connection.

Preliminary Findings

The purposes and objectives of each of these programs are varied, depending on the needs and desires of the community and the school. Underlying the inception of each of the programs is a belief in the need to address issues of gender for adolescents. Although two of the programs offer boys-only classes as well as classes for girls, the impetus for the shift has been an increasing focus on equality of educational opportunities for girls. Some of the original purposes of these single-gender classes that have been suggested by the teachers and administrators in all three programs include (a) opportunities for adolescents to focus more on their academic learning rather than their social concerns; (b) providing "safe and comfortable" environments for students to discuss issues of importance to them as gendered people; and (c) the need for girls to gain skills and confidence in the areas of math, science, and technology; and concerns for boys regarding literacy.

However, as the programs develop and teachers reflect on the realities of having more homogeneous student groups in their core subject areas, they we are beginning to examine their own educational practices and pedagogy. These programs increased the teachers' awareness of issues of gender both in education and society, such as what is valued, what is encouraged, what is ignored, and for whom? Our investigation has created a window of understanding for ourselves as teachers and teacher educators, and for the teachers with whom we are working.

The policies and practices in each of these programs are driven by the overall goals, some of which are more clearly defined than others. Several goals for single-gender education in relation to girls have been identified. These programs list among their objectives increased confidence on the part of the girls. They want the girls to believe in their own capability. Several programs explicitly delineate their attempt to increase opportunities for girls in math, science, and technology, the traditionally "male" subjects. Safety in the classroom and school and

freedom from bullying, violence, and intimidation are mentioned as important. Parents clearly would like to see a greater focus on schoolwork for their daughters via a removal of distractions caused by boys in the class.

The objectives for boys are less clear, including, again, a greater focus on schoolwork and a focus on increased literacy skills and interests. Results of the 1994, 1995, and 1998 Council of Ministers of Education in Canada literacy study indicate that girls score better than boys in terms of literacy assessment. This is not to disregard the seriousness of the gender inequities in schools for girls, but rather to recognize that there may well be just as serious issues for boys when it comes to literacy. Numerous questions remain as to how Canadian schools may be shortchanging or failing boys and what role literacy plays.

Similarly educational research in Great Britain has indicated the concerns for boys in educational settings—for example, boys don't view education positively, they don't like to read, and some don't read very well—and a growing percentage of boys are "failing" at school (Millard, 1997). Phillips (1998) described how British boys are faced with many pressures as they enter and progress through school. She suggested that there are few acceptable gender positions for males and that boys are expected to be tough, competitive, and independent.

There are shifts taking place in practices in these single-gender schools, some more obvious than others. Even the fact that there are discussions of gender in some of these schools is a major step. The fact that these discussions occur in relative isolation remains a problem. These teachers have few places to go to discuss their common recognitions, experiences, issues, and problems. In some cases this is even true on their own staff.

In terms of practice, there are both strengths and problems. Teachers are coming to understand the implicit gendered nature of schooling and to explore the ways to celebrate and extend learning for both girls and boys. These teachers are beginning to look at the gendered nature of our existing curricula and to change the resources and materials they have been using. There are, however, still problems. The hiring of staff, commitment among appointed staff, and recruitment are not easy in times of cutbacks. School-based administrators find themselves

looking for competent teachers from within their school division with little opportunity for discussions of issues of gender. The logistics of timetabling remain a major factor and problem, in both large and small schools. With limited staff resources, administrators juggle to balance essential resources.

In terms of policy, we think that it's fair to say that these programs are operating, not on established policy, but rather on local working policies. Few school districts in Western Canada have a comprehensive gender-equity policy that encompass equity for students, and even fewer have any in-depth plan for implementation of equity initiatives. In the absence of policy and planning, these programs are carving out their own place in terms of policy development. It is important to note that the Canadian context is different from the United States in that we do not have legislation comparable to Title IX that would challenge the establishment of these programs. In Canada we do have human rights legislation, but it does not carry with it the same implications.

With school-based management in some Western Canadian provinces, there is a wide-open door for local policy. In the two provinces in which we are working, we have found no school division policy to impede or to support these single-gender initiatives. In our local board, for example, a ballet school and a militaristic (Vimy Ridge) school share the same building. A hockey school and Nancy Major All Girls Junior High School operate simultaneously. These four very different programs are indicative of the lack of consistent board vision or policy.

In closing, we want to reiterate that these programs are changing the nature of their schools. It is exciting to see teachers, students, and administrators acknowledge that gender matters in school. We recognize that the American Association for University Women's (1998) report did not report single-gender schools in a very favorable light, and we ask that you consider this report in relation to the private and Catholic school contexts where most of the work was done. In Western Canada these programs are taking place in public schools and are looking at gender issues for both boys and girls. We acknowledge that there has been little research to support what is happening in these programs and that we have a long way yet to go to ensure that

access, inclusion, climate, and empowerment are realized for all the youth in our schools regardless of their construction of gender.

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